



# DRAWING A LINE

Club members participating in the Sportsman User Value Mapping Project are saying, “Don’t develop where we hunt and fish.” **BY TOM DICKSON**

**HERE TOMORROW?** A hunter looks out on one of the many unspoiled environments that still exist in Montana. Top right: Members of the Fly Fishers of the Bitterroot mark fishing areas they believe should be off-limits to development.

BILL BUCKLEY



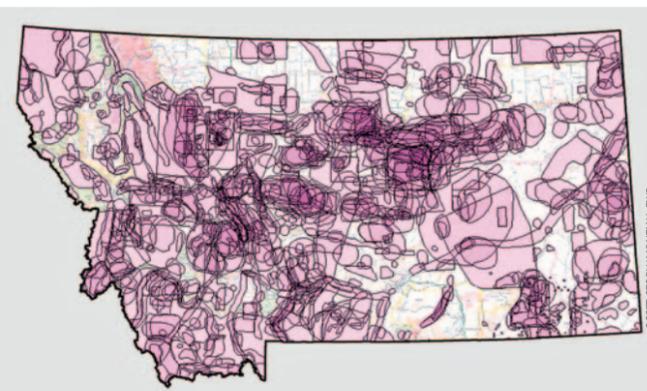
BILL GEER/TRCP

**B**ill Geer had just begun his introduction at a meeting with the Bear Paw Bowmen, a sportsmen’s club in Havre, when an audience member interrupted. Geer was explaining why he travels across Montana to ask local sportsmen’s clubs to take part in a project that could help protect critical hunting and fishing lands. “I never know how these groups will react, but I was only two minutes in when one club member yelled out, ‘Hey, I like this guy already. Let’s buy him a beer.’” Though he has met with 40 different groups in 30 cities over the past two winters, Geer is still surprised by the positive response. “I always wonder about asking hunters and anglers to mark down their bread-and-butter hunting and fishing spots on a map,” he says.

Montana is the pilot state for the Sportsman User Value Mapping Project, a new endeavor of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP). The coalition of national conservation groups and other partners works to conserve fish and wildlife habitat while protecting and improving public access for hunting and fishing. At meetings with Montana sportsmen’s clubs, Geer lays out large-format maps of the state and asks members to mark what they consider their most important hunting and fishing areas. “All my career the focus has been on identifying critical wildlife habitat,” says Geer, previously director of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and now the TRCP policy initiatives manager. “We now have much of that information, and it’s crucial. But what we don’t have, and what I think is equally important, is data on critical hunting and fishing areas. That’s what this project is about.”

Geer says the TRCP will give this baseline information, along with wildlife habitat maps, to the Bureau of Land Management and other federal and state agencies and developers. The goal is to help land managers balance development with the needs of fish, wildlife, and sportsmen. Of particular concern is growing oil and gas development and expanding housing subdivisions in Montana and other western states. “Hunters and anglers are saying, ‘Go ahead and develop, sure, just don’t drill in the mule deer spot I’ve been hunting since I was a boy. Don’t stick a new housing development on the trout stream where I plan to take my grandkids when they get old enough to fish,’” Geer says. “People are realizing that they can’t hunt and fish in industrialized or commercialized landscapes.”

FWP, which supports the project, has been entering the penciled map markings into its extensive map database. “We’re seeing all kinds of things when we overlay the access maps with our biological data maps,” says T. O. Smith, who works on development issues for FWP. “For example, you’d think most hunting is occurring in the best habitat, where the most animals are, but sometimes that’s not the case. Instead, it’s where the most access is. That can help us figure out where to



**PURPLE PLACES** A state map shows areas marked by 40 Montana sportsmen’s clubs. The darkest areas were cited most often as critical for hunting or fishing. Though lacking scientific precision, the mapping survey indicates parts of Montana that hunters and anglers value most and want to see protected from energy, housing, and other development.

participate. “They’ve witnessed the loss of hunting access over the past 50 years and see this as something we should have done years ago,” he says. Don Clark, president of the Libby Rod and Gun Club, says he and several other members, along with the local archery club, welcomed the chance to apply their local knowledge. “There is some real potential if these maps can be used to convince large landowners not to subdivide or develop in areas recognized by hunters and anglers as important,” he says.

The mapping project, which is expanding to other Western states, is funded by small grants from Cinnabar Foundation and Pat-

“They really think it through and sometimes erase lines they’ve put down, saying, ‘No, that’s an important area, but it’s not critical.’”

Aren’t participants wary of revealing their secret spots? Tim Aldrich, head of the Hellgate Hunters and Anglers in Missoula, says his members realized the importance of putting information on a map. “I don’t give up the locations of my areas easily,” he says, “but how else are we going to protect them? It’s a risk we’re willing to take.”

Geer has been surprised that most groups circle areas throughout the state, not just in their locality. “People travel all over to hunt and fish,” he says. “You’ve got hunters from Kalispell driving to

Culbertson for pheasants and anglers from Lewistown going to the Beaverhead to fish trout.” The most frequently identified critical hunting area, Geer says, has been the Missouri Breaks.

#### SALT-OF-THE-EARTH TYPES

Not all club members like the mapping idea. The Custer Rod and Gun Club in Miles City was reluctant to indicate more than just a few obvious spots. “But then a few months later they had a better idea what the project was about, and they invited me back and really went to town on the maps,” Geer says. In White Sulphur Springs, after

Geer gave his introduction, a member whose son worked as a petroleum engineer spoke for half an hour on how reports of natural gas development harming wildlife habitat were untrue. After finishing,

the man left the building. “I figured they’d send me home after that,” Geer says. “But then everyone else got down to mapping.”

Geer has met a broad cross-section of Montanans concerned about threats to their outdoor recreation. “One club had several elderly women, some I think in their 70s and even 80s, who hunted with their husbands. I’ve had young ranchers,

mechanics, and all kinds of salt-of-the-earth people. These are honest-to-goodness users of Montana’s resources.”

The project has allowed Geer to do the type of grassroots community building he believes is essential for the future of fish and wildlife conservation. “All my career I’ve wanted to galvanize hunters and anglers,” he

says. “This project gives them a voice. It’s a way of capturing their passion and putting it in persuasive terms that political leaders will understand.”

“People really like having someone show them the respect of coming out to where they live and asking them what they think,” Geer adds. “They are out on the land all the time.

They know what they’ve got, and they realize this may be their best chance to make sure they don’t lose it.”

For more information on the Sportsman User Value Mapping Project, contact Bill Geer at (406) 396-0909; bgeer@trcp.org. Learn more about the TRCP at trcp.org.



**THE POWER OF THE PENCIL** Participants in the mapping project make their mark to protect vital hunting and fishing lands and waters across Montana.

1. Flathead Wildlife, Inc., 2. Dillon Area Sportsmen,
3. Park County Rod and Gun Club, 4. Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, 5. Prickly Pear Sportsman’s Association, 6. Custer Rod and Gun Club, 7. Big Sky Upland Bird Association, 8. Lewistown Archers, 9. Ashland/Broadus Sportsmen, 10. Region 4 Sportsmen’s Association, 11. Tobacco Valley Rod and Gun Club, 12. Libby Rod and Gun Club, 13. Rosebud/Treasure Wildlife Association.

**“Will this project preclude economic development? No, but it will balance it. Hunters and anglers work for a living. They understand the need for development. But they won’t support development that harms their outdoor recreation.”**



direct our limited access dollars through Block Management and other programs.”

#### SHOULD HAVE DONE IT YEARS AGO

Hayes Goosey, president of the Park County Rod and Gun Club in Livingston, says older club members in particular were eager to

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

## PARTICIPATING CLUBS

- Anaconda Sportsman’s Club
- Ashland/Broadus Sportsmen
- Bear Paw Bowmen
- Big Sky Upland Bird Association
- Billings Rod & Gun Club
- Bullhook Bottoms Blackpowder Club
- Custer Rod & Gun Club
- Dawson County Rod & Gun Club
- Dillon Area Sportsmen
- Federation of Fly Fishers
- Flathead Wildlife, Inc.
- Fly Fishers of the Bitterroot
- Forsyth Rifle & Pistol Club
- Gallatin Wildlife Association
- Great Falls Archers
- Great Falls Chapter, Safari Club International
- Headwaters Fly Fishers
- Helena Hunters & Anglers Assn.
- Hellgate Hunters & Anglers
- Jefferson Valley Sportsmen’s Assn.
- Laurel Rod & Gun Club
- Lewistown Archers
- Lewistown Sportsmen
- Libby Archery Club
- Libby Rod & Gun Club
- Magic City Fly Fishers
- Malta Area Sportsmen
- Meagher County Sportsmen
- Park County Rod & Gun Club
- Polson Outdoors
- Prickly Pear Sportsman’s Assn.
- Pronghorn Archery Club
- Public Land/Water Access Assn.
- Ravalli Co. Fish & Wildlife Assn.
- Region 4 Sportsmen’s Assn.
- Rosebud/Treasure Wildlife Assn.
- Russell Country Sportsmen
- Skyline Sportsmen’s Association
- Tobacco Valley Rod & Gun Club
- Valley Sportsmen’s Association